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SUBJECT: POSSIBLE MILAIR SUPPORT FOR AFGHAN HAJJ

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REF: KABUL 5279

Summary and Action Request

1. (SBU) Afghanistan was scheduled to begin its Hajj operation on November 22. Failure on the part of the Afghan state airline, Ariana, to source reliable aircraft, get the necessary Saudi approvals, and get schedule slots for arriving and departing Jeddah has thrown the planning badly off track. The last several days have produced good progress, but the possibility remains that the airlift operation will be seriously delayed or impaired. Given the extreme political sensitivity of the Hajj in Afghanistan, and the weak position of the Karzai government, the GoA can be expected to ask the U.S. for help in moving people to Jeddah if Ariana fails. Embassy requests that Department demarche NATO capitals and approach the Pentagon to plan for this contingency; see paragraph 6. END SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST.

2. (SBU) With the Hajj airlift operation two days away, the GoA and Afghan air carriers are still trying to solidify their plans for moving some 24,000 Hajjis from four Afghan cities to Jeddah. President Karzai is increasingly nervous about Hajj planning shortfalls, and he believes that a failure could pose a serious challenge to his government's stability. He has asked the Embassy and NATO for support in the airlift operation, by military airlift if necessary. Karzai has offered to pay for any such assistance; the problem is not a lack of money but the inability of Ariana, the state-owned airline, to lease aircraft that the Saudi General Civil Aviation Authority finds safe enough to approve.

3. (SBU) Over the past several weeks, Embassy has enlisted help from AmEmbassy Riyadh and AmConsulate Jeddah to urge the SAG to act on approving safe aircraft from the two Afghan carriers and to assign landing and takeoff slots as quickly as possible (reftel). The private Afghan airline, Kamair, has received certification for five aircraft (all smaller planes: MD-80 series, DC-9, B-737), with a possibility for a sixth. This gives Kamair enough capacity to serve its three markets: Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. AmConsulate

Jeddah has informed us that slots for Kamair are likely to be assigned within a day or two.

14. (SBU) The main problem with approvals has been Ariana's inability to hire aircraft from reputable charter operators; it has submitted several aircraft from banned countries, which the Saudis have rejected. Over the past several days, with help from the Saudi civil air authority, Ariana has found two Boeing 747s to charter. This is enough to transport the Hajjis from Kabul to Jeddah, which actually requires only one B-747. The Saudis have certified one 747 and are in the process of considering the second approval. Once approved, the SAG will still need to provide landing slots for the aircraft.

15. (U) To try to fill the gap created by Ariana's inability to find suitable aircraft, we have requested that USDOC search for U.S. carriers that might be interested in chartering aircraft for the Afghan Hajj, in case state carrier Ariana runs out of options. Given the short response time and the risks involved in serving the Afghan market, the chances of an American private carrier to assist the airlift look slim.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

16. (SBU) While the situation has taken a turn for the better since last week, there is still a distinct possibility that Afghanistan will not end up with enough approved aircraft or slots to move all the Hajjis. If this occurs, the GoA will surely ask us for help. Karzai has already asked the Ambassador for U.S. airlift support, military or civilian, in case all else fails. We understand from ISAF here that he has made a similar request of NATO. Embassy believes that Karzai is not exaggerating the threat of a significant

KABUL 00005547 002 OF 002

Hajj operation failure. We therefore request that Department demarche NATO capitals and approach the Pentagon to begin planning airlift support in case of such a contingency.

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